

U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

contact: paoci@eur.army.mil
phone: 49-6221-57-5815 / DSN 370-5815
fax: 49-6221-57-6376 / DSN 370-6376



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Return of Leighton Barracks to German authorities marks the end of U.S. Army presence in Wuerzburg

By Mark Heeter

U.S. Army Garrison Schweinfurt Public Affairs Office

SCHWEINFURT, Germany – "Well, I got here in '79."

A little farther down the line, in the back of the crowd, another voice was heard reminiscing.

"More than 50 years ago..."

These two storytellers were among the last to walk the snowy ground on Leighton Barracks in Wuerzburg, Germany, as the Army returned the installation to German authorities, Jan. 14.

A brief ceremony marked the end of a relationship with the city of Wuerzburg and its surrounding communities that began in the closing days of World War II.



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Soldiers from U.S. Army Europe's 15th Engineer Battalion, stationed in Schweinfurt, Germany, lower the flag over Leighton Barracks in Wuerzburg, Germany for the final time, Jan. 14. The U.S. Army returned the installation to German authorities following the ceremony.

"Our Army was lucky to spend so many years in this beautiful city," said U.S. Army Garrison Schweinfurt Commander Lt. Col. Anthony Haager, who was responsible for carrying Leighton Barracks across the finish line.

"On behalf of those who have called Wuerzburg home, thank you for the unwavering friendship and partnership and dedication," Haager said, addressing a crowd that included Dr. Paul Beinhofer, president of Lower Franconia, and Wuerzburg Lord Mayor Georg Rosenthal.

Haager also thanked the many workers -- several of whom were among the attendees -- who kept the community going for so many years.

Wuerzburg came under the control of U.S. occupational forces April 7, 1945, with American GIs taking control of the hospital the next day, according to Beinhofer, who reflected on the importance of the American military presence in Wuerzburg and Germany.

"With the retreat of the Stars and Stripes — the American flag — today, a long era, more than 60 years of the U.S. Army here in Wuerzburg, is ending," Beinhofer said.

"The U.S. Army freed this land from the Nazi regime. The United States also, through the Marshall Plan, massively supported its rebuilding," Beinhofer said. "For that, (Lt.) Col. Haager, we are thankful, and will not forget this."

The 1st Infantry Division called Wuerzburg home from 1945 to 1955 and returned its "Big Red One" colors to Leighton Barracks in 1996, remaining until summer 2006, when it moved to Fort Riley, Kan. The "Rock of the Marne," the 3rd Infantry Division, was headquartered there from 1958 to 1996.

Beinhofer, switching at the close of his remarks to English and speaking directly to Haager, seemed to address the many thousands of Soldiers, families and civilians who called Wuerzburg home.

"You are welcome in Lower Franconia -- you know that. We are and will be friends now and in the future. God bless you," he said.

So the time had come.

Soldiers from U.S. Army Europe's 15th Engineer Battalion, the newest unit in the Schweinfurt military community, lowered the American flag for the final time over an installation with one of the longest histories in the German-American partnership.

